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Mystery Surrounds Fate of Swede Who Saved Jews

By NADINE BROZAN

Nina Lagergren of Stockholm and Annette Lantos of San Francisco, though they met for the first time earlier this summer, have had a common mission for more than three decades.

Mrs. Lagergren is the half-sister of Raoul Wallenberg, a Swedish businessman who saved 20,000 Jews in Budapest from the Nazis and who was then taken prisoner by Soviet forces. She has never accepted the official Soviet explanation that Mr. Wallenberg died of a heart attack in a Soviet prison in 1947.

Mrs. Lantos is a Hungarian Jewish refugee who says that neither she nor her husband, Dr. Thomas P. Lantos, a professor of economics at the University of California in San Francisco, "nor any other Jew in Budapest in 1944, would have survived but for Mr. Wallenberg."

Finally, after a news conference in New York sponsored by the American Jewish Committee, the two women met in Washington with Secretary of State Cyrus R. Vance. A State Department spokesman said that Mr. Vance "told them that we have recently raised this case with the Soviet Government and we are awaiting a Soviet reply."

Senators Announce Effort

The same week, the formation of a Free Raoul Wallenberg Committee was announced by four Senators, including Daniel Patrick Moynihan, Democrat of New York. Similar support has been expressed in Britain and Israel.

For Mrs. Lagergren, who came to the United States this summer to join Mrs. Lantos in recruiting support for their search, the efforts now promised by world leaders mark the end of solitude.

"For all of these years we have been alone in this struggle," she said. "Because Sweden had been a neutral country during the war, there were no other Swedish families with a political prisoner. Everybody said, 'How can you believe he's still alive?'"

Answered American Request

From May 15 to July 7, 1944, 437,000 Jews from rural Hungary were deported to Auschwitz. That summer, Raoul Wallenberg, then 32 years old, answered a request made to the American Ambassador to Sweden by President Roosevelt to help save the Jews of Hungary. He seemed a natural candidate: He was the descendant of an influential family, he was multilingual and well educated and he had already publicly expressed concern for the plight of the Jews, although he was not a Jew.

He was accredited as secretary of the Swedish legation in Budapest and arrived there on July 9. He began issuing Swedish protective passports, which granted their 5,000 bearers the protection of the Swedish Government, but he could not give them the right to emigrate.

Swedish Passports Used

In October, the anti-Semitic extremists known as the Arrow Cross overthrew the Hungarian Government and threatened to exterminate the Jews.

"Somehow Raoul managed to maintain

the legal facade of the passports," Mrs. Lagergren said. "He discovered that one Arrow Cross Cabinet member had Jewish blood somewhere in his family and got him to exert pressure on the Nazis to continue recognizing the passports."

Meanwhile, German military units were marching some 40,000 Jews to forced labor in Austrian factories. Official records showed that Mr. Wallenberg literally snatched away 2,000 Jews on the

highway with assertions of Swedish protection and also forced the return of additional Jews already working in factories.

According to witnesses, Mr. Wallenberg uncovered a Nazi plot to annihilate all Jews just before the Russians stormed

the city. "He convinced the German forces that they would be treated as war criminals for the last-minute slaughter, and he stopped it," Mrs. Lagergren said.

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Denials by Soviets

When the Russians took the city, Wallenberg attempted to negotiate restoration of the Jews' rights and property but was taken into Russian custody. Despite 20 inquiries by the Swedish Government over 12 years, Soviet officials denied any knowledge of Mr. Wallenberg's presence in their country.

In the early 1950's, Sweden integrated wartime captives being released from Soviet prisons and pieced together evidence suggesting that Mr. Wallenberg had been incarcerated on charges of espionage and that he was still alive.

In 1957 the Soviet Union announced it had found a scrap of paper in a prison that recorded the death of one "Wallenberg" from a heart attack. The spell was incorrect and no first name was given.

Comment Is Retracted

In 1961 Dr. Nanna Svartz, a fan friend, was attending a medical conference in Moscow and asked a Russian professor if he knew about the case. "He told her, 'Yes, he's in a mental hospital and a bad state,'" Mrs. Lagergren said. Svartz appealed to the Swedish Foreign Minister, who wrote to Premier Nikita Khrushchev. When Dr. Svartz returned to Moscow two months later, her Russian colleague retracted his account, confirming that he had been misunderstood.

This year two new pieces of evidence came to the surface. A Polish officer who emigrated to Israel said he had been in prison with Mr. Wallenberg in the 1950's and a Russian Jew telephoned his daughter in Israel and said that he had met a Swede who had been in prison for 30 years and who was well. Although that phone call was made in 1978, it did not become public knowledge until several months ago.

"For years I have been struggling to reconcile myself with the Holocaust," I decided that I would never be able to understand the cruelty," said Mrs. Lantos, who lectures on the Holocaust. "I decided I had to concentrate on those like Raoul Wallenberg, who had risked their lives to save us. That kind of heroism brought some sort of peace."

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